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THE EMBEZZLER

THE EMBEZZLER

By
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I.

IT was nine o'clock. The little town of Vauchamp had retired for the night, silent and black, beneath an icy November rain. In Des Recollets Street, one of the narrowest and most deserted streets of the Saint-Jean quarter, a light shone in a window of an old house, from the broken gutters of which torrents of water gushed.

It was Madame Burle who was sitting before a scant wood fire, while her grandson, Charles, studied his lessons by the pale light of the lamp.

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The apartment, rented for sixty francs a year, was composed of four enormous rooms that it was impossible to heat. Madame Burle slept in the largest room; her son, the captain-treasurer, had taken the room overlooking the street,¹ near the dining-room; and little Charles, in his small iron bed, was lost in the depths of an immense drawing-room with mildewed hangings, which was not used. The few articles of furniture belonging to Captain Burle and his mother, massive mahogany of the Empire period, that the frequent moving from one barrack to another had indented and robbed of their copper trimmings, were dwarfed beneath the high ceilings, from which seemed to fall a fine shadowy dust. The tiled floor, painted red, cold and hard, froze one's feet; and, in front of the chairs, there was nothing but small squares of worn-out carpet betokening

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a shivering poverty in this desert through which every wind whistled by way of the disjointed doors and windows.

Near the fireplace, Madame sat in the depths of her yellow velvet armchair, watching the smoking remnant of a log with the fixed gaze of old people who live their lives over within themselves. She remained in this position days at a time, with her tall figure and her long serious face, the lips of which never relaxed into a smile. Widow of a colonel who died on the eve of his becoming a general, mother of a captain whom she had accompanied even in his campaigns, she preserved a military stiffness and she had formed ideas of duty, honor, and patriotism that held her rigid, as if withered beneath the severity of discipline. When her son became a widower, after five years of marriage, she had naturally undertaken the

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bringing up of Charles with the strictness of a sergeant charged with the instruction of recruits. She watched over the child, not tolerating a caprice nor an irregularity, forcing him to sit up till midnight, and sitting up herself, if his tasks were not finished. Charles, of a delicate temperament, grew up very pale under that unswerving discipline, his face lighted by beautiful eyes, too large and too bright.

In her long silences, Madame turned over and over but one idea,—her son had betrayed her hopes. That sufficed to occupy her thoughts, causing her to relive her life from the birth of her little one, whom she had seen attaining the highest grades in the midst of a tumult of glory, to this narrow existence in barracks, these sad and monotonous days that fall to the post of captain-treasurer beyond which he would never rise

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and in which he was becoming heavy and dull. But the beginning of his career had filled her with pride; for an instant, she could have believed her dream realized. Burle had hardly left St. Cyr when he distinguished himself at the battle of Solferino by capturing, with a handful of men, a battery of the enemy's. He was decorated; the papers spoke of his heroism; he was known as one of the bravest soldiers in the army. And, slowly, the hero grew fat, succumbed to his flesh, happy, slack, and cowardly. In 1870, he was only captain. He was taken prisoner in the first engagement. He returned from Germany furious, swearing that they should not send him to war again. As he could not quit the army, ignorant of any trade, he succeeded in securing the post of captain-treasurer, a niche in which, he said, they would at least allow him a peaceful

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death. That day, Madame Burle had experienced a terrible anguish. It was finished,—and she had never since relaxed from her rigid attitude.

The wind rushed through the street, a wave of rain dashed against the windows. The old woman raised her eyes from the smouldering vine-roots to assure herself that Charles had not fallen asleep over his Latin translation. That twelve-year-old child had renewed a supreme hope to which was linked her stubborn desire for glory. At first, she had hated him with all the hate she felt for his mother, a little lace-maker, pretty and delicate, that the captain, mad with desire and not being able to make her his mistress, had married.

Then, the mother dead and the father wallowing in his vices, Madame Burle had renewed her dreaming over this poor sickly

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being that she was bringing up with difficulty. She wanted him strong; he should be the hero that Burle refused to be; and, in her severe coldness, she anxiously watched him grow, feeling of his limbs, impressing courage upon his mind. Little by little, blinded by her passion, she believed that at last she had the man of her family. The child, of a tender and dreamy nature, had a physical horror of military career; but, as his grandmother inspired him with terror, and as he was very gentle and obedient, he repeated what she said, appearing resigned to becoming a soldier some day.

In the meanwhile, Madame Burle noticed that the translation was not getting on. Charles, lulled by the noise of the storm, drowsed, pen in hand and his eyes open. She rapped with her stiff fingers upon the edge of the table; he started and opened his

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dictionary, turning the leaves feverishly. Still silent, the old woman poked the blackened roots in an attempt to relight the fire, but without success.

In the past when she still believed in her son, she had despoiled herself,—he had squandered her little income in the vices that she dared not probe. Even now, he was emptying the house,—everything was going to the street. Within, there was poverty, bare rooms, cold viands. She never spoke of these things to him, for, with her respect for discipline, he remained the master of the house. Only, at times, she was seized with a shudder at the thought that Burle might commit some folly that would prevent Charles from entering the army.

She rose to fetch a dried vine branch from the kitchen, when a terrific gust shook the doors, tore off a shutter, and drove the

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water from the broken gutters in a torrent against the windows. And in the midst of this tumult, the door-bell rang. Who could be calling at such an hour and in such weather? Burle never came in, when he did come home, until after midnight. She opened the door. An officer appeared, soaked, bursting with curses.

“Sacred name of God! What dog’s weather!”

It was Major Laguitte, a brave old soldier who had served under Colonel Burle, in Madame Burle’s better days. Starting out as the child of the troop, he had attained through his bravery rather than his intelligence, the grade of chief of battalion, when an infirmity, a contraction of the muscles of his thigh, the result of a wound, had forced him to accept the post of major. He limped slightly; but it would not do to tell

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him so to his face, for he refused to admit it.

"It is you, Major?" exclaimed Madame Burle, more and more astonished.

"Yes, by God!" growled Laguitte. "And I must care a lot for you to run the streets in that damned rain! Why, you wouldn't put a parson out in such weather!"

He shook himself; pools formed on the floor from his boots. Then, he looked around him.

"I must absolutely see Burle. Is he already in bed,—that loafer?"

"No; he hasn't come in yet," said the old woman in her hard voice.

The major flew into a rage.

"What! Not come in! Then they were making a fool of me, at his cafe,—at Melame's, you understand. I went there, and a maid laughed in my face, telling me that the

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captain had gone to bed. Ah! the devil! I felt that,—I wanted to pull her ears!”

He calmed down; he stamped about the room, undecided, upset. Madame Burle watched him steadily.

“You wish to speak to the captain himself?” she asked finally.

“Yes.”

“Can’t I give him your message?”

“No.”

She did not insist. But she remained standing, always watching the major who could not seem to decide to go. At last, his anger surged up again.

“Well, so much the worse! As I have come here, you might as well know about it. It will be all the better, perhaps.”

And he seated himself before the grate stretching out his muddy boots as if a bright fire were burning. Madame Burle was about

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to return to her armchair when she perceived that Charles, vanquished by fatigue, had let his head drop between the open pages of his book. The major's entrance had roused him; then, seeing that no attention was paid to him, he succumbed to sleep. His grandmother started towards him to rap his delicate hands that seemed to bleach in the lamplight, when Laguitte stopped her.

"No, no; let that poor little man sleep. It isn't so amusing; he needn't hear it."

The old woman reseated herself. A silence ensued. The two looked at each other.

"Well! It has happened!" said the major at last. "That scoundrel, Burle, has done it."

Madame Burle did not start. She paled, but she sat more erect than ever in her armchair. The major continued,—

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"I had my suspicions. I had promised myself to speak to you some day. Burle was spending too much; besides he had an idiotic expression that I did not like. But I never could have believed . . . Ah! Good God! A man must be a fool to do such things!"

And he struck his knee fiercely with his fist, strangled with indignation. The old woman had to ask him a straight question.

"He has stolen?"

"You cannot imagine the thing. I never verified anything. I approved his accounts; I gave my signature. Only, when there was to be an inspection, on account of the colonel, who is a maniac, I said to him, 'Old man, look over your cash-box,—I am responsible for it.' . . . And I was quite easy. However, within the last month, as he looked so queer and I heard nasty stories, I looked more carefully into his books. Everything seemed to be regular, very well kept. . . ."

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He stopped, carried away by such a gust of fury that he had to relieve himself on the spot.

“Name of God! Name of God! It is not his crookedness that angers me,—it is the disgusting way he has acted toward me. He has made a goat of me,—do you hear, Madame Burle? Damn it! Does he take me for an old fool?”

“Then, he has stolen?” again asked Madame Burle.

“This evening,” resumed the major, somewhat quieted, “I was leaving the table when Gagneux came up. You know Gagneux,—the butcher at the corner of the Herbes Square. Another dirty rascal, who has the contract for the meat and foists on our men all the old dead cows of the county. Well! I received him like a dog, when he unfolded the secret. A nice mess! It seems that

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Burle paid him only in instalments. Such underhand work! Such a confusion of figures that the devil himself couldn't find his way! Briefly, Burle owes him two thousand francs, and the butcher threatens to tell the colonel everything, if he isn't paid. The worst of it is that that pig, Burle, to mix me up in it, gave me a false receipt every week that he boldly signed with Gagneux's name. And this trick he played on me,—me, his old friend! Good God!"

The major rose, threw his arms and clenched fists toward the ceiling, and fell back again into his chair. Madame Burle repeated again,—

"He has stolen. It must be that."

Then, without a word of judgment or condemnation of her son, she added simply,—

"Two thousand francs. But we haven't got them. There are perhaps thirty francs here."

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"I suspected it," said Laguitte. "And do you know where all that goes? To Milanie, a damned jade who has made an idiot of Burle. . . . Oh! the women! I said they would break him! I don't know what that animal is made of! He is only five years younger than I, and he is still burning with passion! What a beastly temperament!"

There was another silence. Outside, the rain increased, and one could hear, in the little sleeping town, the noise of chimney-pots and tiles that the storm dashed to the paving-stones.

"Well," said the major, rising, "it doesn't arrange matters to stay here. I have informed you, so I am going."

"What is to be done? To whom can one turn?" murmured the old woman.

"Don't despair. We shall see. If I only had those two thousand francs! But you know that I am not rich."

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He stopped, embarrassed. He, a bachelor, drank little, but lost at cards what cognac and absinthe saved him. With that, he was very honest.

“Never mind!” he continued on the threshold. “I am going just the same to make a row at that wench’s. I will move heaven and earth. Burle, the son of Burle, convicted of theft! That would mean the end of the world! I would rather blow up the town. And, for God’s sake, don’t take it to heart! It is still more vexing for me!”

He shook hands roughly, and disappeared in the shadows of the stairway while she lighted him with the lamp. When she set the lamp upon the table, in the silence and the bareness of the vast room, she stood a moment motionless before Charles who still slept, with his face between the leaves of his dictionary. It was the head of a girl,

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with its long fair hair. She gave a sharp rap on his hand, saying:

“Charles, your translation.”

The child awoke, bewildered, shivering, and began rapidly turning the leaves of the dictionary. At this moment, Major Laguitte who slammed the street door, received upon his head such a torrent of water that he could be heard swearing above the roar of the tempest. Then, in the midst of the down-pour, there was no other sound than the scratching of Charles’ pen on the paper. Madame Burle had resumed her place before the fireplace, her eyes upon the cinders, with her old fixed idea and her customary attitude.

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II.

The Cafe de Paris, run by the widow Madame Melanie Cartier, was on Palace Square, a large irregular space planted with dusty elms. At Vauchamp, one asked,—“Are you coming to Melanie’s?”

At the end of the first room, which was quite large, there was another,—the “divan,” very narrow and furnished with leather-covered settees along the walls and four marble-topped tables in the corners. It was there that Melanie, deserting her counter where

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she had installed her maid, Phrasine, passed the evenings with several habitués, the intimate customers, those that were called in the town "Those gentlemen of the divan." That was a mark of distinction.

Madame Cartier was left a widow at twenty-five years. Her husband, a wheelwright, who had startled Vauchamp by taking the Café de Paris on the death of an uncle, had returned with her, one fine morning, from Montpellier, where he went every six months for his liquors. He furnished his house. He had doubtless chosen the sort of woman he wanted, engaging and good for his business. No one ever knew where he had picked her up; he did not marry her until he had tried her behind the counter for six months. Opinions in Vauchamp were divided—some considered her superb, others called her a gendarme. She was a large wo-

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man, with large features and coarse hair that fell over her eyebrows. But no one denied her power to twist the men around her finger. She had fine eyes that she made use of to gaze fixedly at those gentlemen of the divan, and they paled and became supine.

Cartier's death was singular. There was a rumor that there had been a quarrel between husband and wife, and that a gathering had formed as a result of a kick in the abdomen. Besides, Melanie found herself much embarrassed, for the cafe was not prospering. The wheelwright had dissipated his uncle's money in drinking absinthe and playing billiards. It was thought that she would be obliged to sell. But that life pleased her. She needed only a few regular customers,—the big room could remain empty. She had the divan papered in white and gold and the

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settees re-upholstered in leather. At first, she kept company there with a druggist; then came a manufacturer of vermicelli, a lawyer, a retired magistrate. And thus it came about that the cafe remained open, although the waiter did not serve twenty drinks a day. The authorities tolerated the establishment, because the proprieties were always observed, and many respectable people would have found themselves compromised.

Of an evening, in the large room, four or five small landlords of the quarters had a game of dominoes. As the waiter became superfluous, Melanie discharged him. It was Phrasine who lighted the one gas jet in the corner for the small landlords. Meanwhile, Melanie herself served the gentlemen of the divan, amiable without taking liberties, permitting herself only in hours of

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abandonment to lean upon a shoulder of one of them, in order to follow a delicate play of *ecarte*.

One evening, these gentlemen, who had ended by tolerating each other, were disagreeably surprised to find Captain Burle installed in the divan. He had come in, by chance, in the morning, to drink a vermouth, and he had talked with Melanie. When he returned in the evening, Phrasine immediately showed him into the little room.

Two days later, Burle reigned without having driven off either the druggist, or the vermicelli manufacturer, or the lawyer, or the retired magistrate. The captain, short and broad, adored big women. So Melanie, with her handsome body, took him by storm. At the end of two weeks, he had fallen into the bewildered state of a fat lover who is gnawed by desire without growing thin.

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His little eyes, buried in the middle of his puffy face, followed the widow about with the expression of a beaten dog's. He forgot himself in continual ecstasy before that mannish face with its wiry hair. For fear of her displeasure, he tolerated those gentlemen of the divan and gave her his pay to the last cent. It was a sergeant who pronounced the word on the situation,—“Burle has found his hole, and he will stay in it.” A buried man!

It was nearly ten o'clock when Major Laguitte again opened furiously the door of the Cafe de Paris. The major, soaked to the skin, leaving a stream behind him, went straight up to the bar, where Phrasine was reading a novel.

“Hussy!” he cried. “So you make sport of soldiers? You deserve . . .”

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And he raised his hand, describing a blow that would have felled an ox. The little maid drew back, frightened, while the bourgeois, amazed, turned their heads without understanding. But the major wasted no time, he pushed open the door to the divan, and threw himself between Burle and Melanie at the very moment that the latter was giving sips of grog to the captain much as one feeds a canary. Only the magistrate and the druggist had ventured out that evening and they had gone home early, being depressed. Melanie, being in need of three hundred francs for the next day, took advantage of the occasion to practice her coaxing ways.

“Come! the darling of his mother! Open thy beak! It is good,—isn’t it, little pig?”

The captain, very red and blear-eyed, sipped the spoon with an expression of profound enjoyment.

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“For God’s sake!” exclaimed the major. “Are you being taken care of by females these days?”

Burle, pushing aside the grog, had shuddered. With an irritated movement, Melanie had come forward as if to protect him with her large body. But Laguitte looked her in the eye with a tranquil and resolute air that threatened women well know means a blow.

“Leave us,” he said simply.

She hesitated a second, then, white with rage, she rejoined Phrasine.

When they were at last alone, Major Laquitte planted himself in front of Captain Burle; then, folding his arms, he leaned forward and shouted in the other’s face,—

“You dirty hound!”

The captain, upset, tried to retort, but he hadn’t time.

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“Shut up! You have played a dirty trick on a friend! You have stuck me with false receipts that could send us both to the galleys!”

Burle, fallen back in his chair, was livid. A feverish tremor shook his limbs. The major continued, walking around him and striking the tables with his fist.

“You have stolen like a quill-driver, and for that big camel! If your had stolen for your mother, there would be some honor in it. But, good God! they starve at home and you bring your money to this joint! Are you crazy, at your age to take up with such a gendarme? Now, don’t lie! I saw you a moment ago at your dirty play!”

Burle was silent, staring, with an imbecile expression.

“And not a radish!” resumed the major. “Aha! can you see yourself between two gendarmes, you dirty scoundrel?”

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He calmed down, and taking the captain by the wrist, raised him up.

"Come along! We've got to do something right away, for I can't sleep with that on my stomach. I have an idea."

In the large room, Melanie and her maid, Phrasine, were talking earnestly. When she saw the two men, Melanie came forward, saying to Burle in a cooing voice,—

"Why, captain, are you going already?"

"Yes, he is going," responded Laguitte, brutally. "And I am pretty sure he'll never again put his foot into this filthy hole!"

The little maid, frightened, plucked her mistress's dress. She had the misfortune to murmur the word "drunkard." On the instant, the major let fly the blow that had been burning his hand. The two women dodged and he only grazed Phrasine's head, flattening her cap and breaking a comb.

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The little landlords were very indignant. Laguitte exclaimed,—

“For God’s sake! let’s get out, or I’ll knock down every one in the place!”

Outside, in order to cross the square, they waded through water above their ankles. The rain streamed down their faces. While the captain proceeded in silence, the major again heaped reproaches upon him. A nice time, wasn’t it, to be running about the streets? If he hadn’t committed that criminal folly, the two of them might have been in their warm beds. Then, he spoke of Gagneux. A scoundrel whose rotten meat had twice given the whole regiment a colic. In a week, his contract would expire, and he would need the devil’s help to get it again.

“It depends on me,—I choose whom I want,” growled the major. “I would rather cut off my arm than help that poisoner to make another cent!”

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He slipped, fell into a puddle up to his knees, and, strangled with curses, he added,—

“You know, I am going now to see him. I’ll go up, you wait at the door, I want to find out what that toad has in his belly, and if he would dare go to the colonel to-morrow, as he threatens. A butcher! Good God! To compromise one’s self with a butcher! Ah! you are not proud,—you!”

They reached Herbes Square. Gagneux’s house was quite dark, but Laguitte knocked violently, and, at last the door was opened. Left alone in the thick night, Captain Burle did not think of seeking shelter. He remained at the corner of the market-place, standing in the rain, his head filled with a buzzing that prevented his thinking. When the major came out at the end of an hour, it seemed to the captain that he had only just gone in.

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Laguitte said nothing. Burle did not dare question him. Then, they began to follow the obscure streets, where the water flowed in torrents. As they again passed the Cafe de Paris, the major tapped the captain's shoulder and said,—

If you ever go into that joint again . . .”

“Don't be afraid!” answered the captain.

And he held out his hand, but Laguitte continued,—

“No; I'll accompany you to your door. Then, I'll be sure of you for this night anyway.”

When they turned into Des Recollets Street, they slowed up. Then, in front of the door, after taking out his key, the captain felt he must know what to expect.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well!” answered the major, roughly. “I am a low crook like you! Yes, I have done

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a dirty job! May the devil take you! Our poor soldiers will have to eat rotten meat for another three months!"

And he explained that Gagneux, that disgusting Gagneux, had forced him into a bargain. Gagneux would not report to the colonel,—he would even make a present of the two thousand francs by giving genuine receipts for the false ones. But, in return, he demanded of the major the meat contract, and the bargain was struck.

"God! What nasty work, you animal, for two thousand francs!"

Burle, strangled with emotion, had seized his old friend's hand. He could only sputter his thanks. The detestable bargain that the major was forced to make in order to save him affected him to tears.

"It is the first time," said the major, "and it had to be done. Only, don't begin again, or I'll be damned if I do it a second time!"

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The captain embraced him. When he went in, the major remained at the door to make sure that he had gone to bed. Then, as midnight sounded and the rain still beat down, he went painfully homeward. The thought of his men rent his heart, and, in a changed voice, full of tender pity, he exclaimed,—

“The poor devils! They have to eat dead cow,—all for two thousand francs!”

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III.

The regiment was in a state of stupefaction. Burle had broken with Melanie. At the end of a week, the thing was proved to be undeniable. The captain no longer put foot within the Cafe de Paris. It was said that the druggist had slipped into his warm place, to the sorrow of the retired magistrate.

And, more incredible still, Captain Burle lived shut up in Des Recollets Street. He was reformed to the extent of passing his evenings by the fireside, listening to little

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Charles' lessons. His mother, who had not breathed a word of his transactions with Gagneux, maintained her severe erectness; but her glances said that she believed him cured.

Two weeks later, the major came one evening to invite himself to dinner. He felt a certain embarrassment in meeting Burle again. Yet, as the captain had pulled up, he wished to clasp his hand and break bread with him.

Burle was in his room when Laguitte arrived. Madame Burle received him. After saying that he had come to dinner, he lowered his voice.

"Well!" he asked.

"Everything is going better."

"Nothing suspicious?"

"Nothing. . . . He goes to bed at nine o'clock, is never out, and looks happy."

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“Ah, that’s fine!” said the major. “I knew he only needed a shaking-up. He still has a heart, the animal!”

When Burle appeared, he gripped his hands. And, in front of the fireplace, before dinner, they talked together frankly, lauding the domestic life. The captain declared that he would not give his home for a kingdom. The major approved, the while examining him. Certainly, his good behavior did not take off the fat. He was still bloated, with puffed eyes and thick lips. He drowsed in his chair, repeating,—

“Family life,—there is nothing like it!”

“It’s all very well,” said the major, anxious at seeing him so broken, “but exaggeration is a bad thing. You should take exercise. Go once in a while to the cafe.”

“To the cafe? What for? I have everything I need right here.”

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Charles gathered up his books, and the major was surprised to see a maid come in to set the table.

"So you have a maid?" he said to Madame Burle.

"I had to," she answered, sighing. "My legs are giving out and the house is not properly taken care of. Fortunately, old Cabrol let me have his daughter. You know old Cabrol, the old man who sweeps the market. He didn't know what to do with Rose. I am teaching her to cook."

"How old is she?" asked the major.

"Not yet seventeen. She is stupid and dirty. But I give her only ten francs a month and she eats nothing but soup."

When Rose came in again with a pile of plates, Laguitte, who was not much interested in girls, followed her with his eyes, astonished to find one so ugly. She was small,

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very dark, slightly hunchbacked, with a monkey face in which little green eyes gleamed. Her nose was flat and her mouth large and wide. Her lips being broad and her arms long, she gave the impression of being very strong.

“Good God! What a face!” said Laguitte, amused, when the maid went out.

“Bah!” murmured Burle, carelessly. “She is very willing. She is good enough for washing dishes.”

The dinner was charming. The men told Charles stories of his college. Madame Burle, to show him off, asked him several times, “Don’t you want to be a soldier?” And a smile passed over his white lips, as he answered with the cringing obedience of a dog, “Yes, grandma.”

Rose, heavy-heeled, served without speaking, until the end of the dinner. Then,

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standing beside the captain, who seemed absorbed, she said in a hoarse voice,—

“Will monsieur have some cheese?”

“What?” said Burle, starting. Ah! yes; the cheese. Hold the plate tight!”

He cut a piece, while the little maid beside him looked at him with her narrow eyes. Laguitte laughed. Rose amused him enormously. He lowered his voice, as he murmured in the captain’s ear,—

“Do you know, she fascinates me. I didn’t suppose such a nose and mouth existed. Send her to the colonel some day,—she will divert him.”

Her ugliness inspired a paternal attitude on the major’s part.

“Well, my girl! I want some cheese, too.”

She offered him the plate; and he, the knife planted in the cheese, forgot what he

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was doing in examining her. Rose, very serious, submitted to his scrutiny and waited patiently until the gentleman should get through laughing at her.

She cleared the table and disappeared. Burle dropped off into a nap immediately, while Madame Burle and the major talked. Charles went on with his lessons. At nine o'clock, Burle awoke yawning and announced that he was going to bed. He begged pardon, but his eyes closed in spite of him. When the major took his leave, a half-hour later, Madame Burle vainly sought Rose to light him downstairs. She must have gone to bed; she was a regular hen, that girl, sleeping like a log for twelve hours.

"Don't bother," said the major. "My legs are no better than yours, but by holding on to the banisters, I shall not break any bones.

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Well, dear lady, I am so happy! I have studied Burle and I am convinced that he is not up to any tricks. It certainly was time for him to leave petticoats alone."

In that conversation, what most pleased the major was that he no longer had to verify the captain's accounts. Nothing wearied him like looking over a pile of papers. Now that Burle was straight, the major could smoke his pipe and affix his signature with his eyes closed. However, he always kept one eye primed. The receipts were genuine, the totals balanced; there was no irregularity. But, one morning, not as the result of suspicion but merely because he was re-lighting his pipe, his eye lingered over an addition. He discovered a discrepancy of thirteen francs. He did not mention it to Burle,—he promised himself to be on his guard. The following week, there was an-

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other error,—nineteen francs. So, seized with anxiety, he shut himself up with the books. He spent an abominable morning going over the accounts, sweating, swearing, his head bursting with figures. And, at each addition, he discovered a theft of a few francs. It was miserable,—ten francs, eight francs, eleven francs. Toward the end, there were as few as four and three francs, and on one bill, Burle had substracted only a franc and a half.

“Good God!” exclaimed the major. “This is a dirtier piece of work than the other! The false receipts of Gagneux were bold; while, this time, he is as despicable as a cook that steals a couple of cents from her marketing money!”

The shameful insignificance of the sums filled him with indignation, and he was furious to think he had been duped a second

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time by methods so stupid and so simple. He added up the stolen amounts, which came to a total of five hundred and forty-five francs. The inspection was approaching; it was only necessary for that maniac of a colonel to go over an addition,—and the whole thing would be exposed. This time, Burle was lost. That idea calmed the major. He did not swear; he remained as if frozen, with the image of Madame Burle, erect and despairing, before him.

“Come, come!” he murmured. “First of all, I must see clearly into the affairs of that scoundrel. Afterwards, it will be time enough to act.”

He went to Burle’s office. From the pavement opposite, he saw a skirt disappearing through the doorway. Thinking he was on the scent, he slipped quietly up and listened. It was Melanie. She complained of the gen-

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tlements of the divan; she spoke of a bill that she had not the money to pay; the sheriff was at the cafe; everything would be sold off. Then, as the captain answered coldly that he had not a cent, she burst into tears. Then she tried her old seductions, but the dull voice of the captain answered,—“Impossible, impossible!” At the end of an hour, when Melanie went away, she was furious.

The major, astonished at the turn of affairs, waited an instant before entering the office. He found the captain alone and very calm.

“Wasn’t it that carcass of a Melanie that went out as I came in?” demanded the major.

Burle shrugged his shoulders, murmuring,—

“Yes; she came to try and get two hun-

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dred francs out of me. . . . But, not ten francs,—not ten sous!”

“Well,” said the other, probing him, “I was told that you still go to see her.”

“I! Not on your life! I have had enough of those camels!”

Laguitte went away very perplexed. To what had the captain applied those five hundred and forty-five francs? Was it possible that the scoundrel had turned from women to drinking and gambling? He promised himself to surprise Burle that evening at home. Perhaps by making him talk and questioning his mother, he would solve the mystery.

But, that afternoon, he suffered cruelly from his leg. It had been bothering him for some time, and he had been obliged to resign himself to the use of a cane. That cane was his despair,—he said he was now an

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invalid. However, with a heroic effort, he got out of his armchair, and leaning heavily upon the cane, he dragged himself to the house in Des Recollets Street. Nine o'clock struck when he reached it. The street door was ajar, so he went up, stopping on the third landing to catch his breath. The sound of voices on the floor above surprised him, and, out of curiosity, he went up. At the end of a hall to the left, a ray of light came through an open door; but, at the sound of his creaking boots, the door was closed, and he found himself in total darkness.

"This is idiotic!" he said. "It is some cook going to bed."

However, he advanced as softly as possible and placed his ear against the door. There were two voices. He was spellbound. In the room were that pig of a Burle and that monstrosity, Rose!

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"You promised me three francs," said the latter rudely. Give me three francs!"

"My darling, I will bring them to you to-morrow," said the captain in a pleading voice. "I couldn't to-day. You know that I always keep my promises."

"No, give me three francs, or you can go downstairs again."

She must have been already undressed and seated upon her cot, for it creaked as she moved. The captain strode back and forth.

"Now, be nice."

"Will you leave me alone!" cried Rose. "I'll call out! I'll tell the old lady everything! Give me three francs!"

Burle got angry; he cried. Then, to melt her, he took from his pocket a jar of jam that he had smuggled out of his mother's cupboard. Rose accepted it and set to work on it forthwith, using the handle of a fork

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that was lying on a chest of drawers. It was very good; but, when the captain thought her conquered, she again repulsed him.

“What is your jam to me? It is three francs that I want!”

“You are very unkind to me,” said the captain.” And I have been so good to you. I gave you a dress and earrings and a watch. You don’t even wear my presents.”

“Papa takes care of my things.”

“And all the money you have got out of me?”

“Papa invests it for me.”

There was a silence. Rose was reflecting.

“Listen. If you promise to bring me six francs to-morrow evening, I am willing. Get down on your knees and swear to bring me six francs!”

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Major Laguitte, shaking with rage, left the door and went to lean against the banisters. His legs were trembling, and he brandished his cane like a sabre in the shadow of the stairs. He understood now why that hog stayed at home, and went to bed at nine o'clock. A nice conversion! And with a dirty wench that the lowest among his troopers would not have touched!

He went down and rang Madame Burle's bell. At the end of five long minutes, the old lady opened the door.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "but I thought that stupid Rose was still there. . . . I shall have to go and drag her out of bed."

The major prevented her going.

"And Burle?" he asked.

"Oh! he is in bed since nine o'clock. Will you knock on his door?"

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"No, no; I only wanted to wish you good evening."

As they passed the captain's door, Madame Burle was surprised to see the key on the outside.

"Go in," she said. "It is bad for him to sleep so much. It makes him heavy."

And, before he could stop her, she opened the door and stood petrified upon finding the room unoccupied. Laguitte turned crimson and looked so foolish that she understood suddenly, enlightened by a thousand little happenings.

"You knew it, you knew it," she stammered. "Why didn't you warn me? My God! In my house, and near his own son,—with that dishwasher, that monster! . . . He has stolen again,—I feel it."

She stood erect, white and rigid. Then she added in a hard voice,—

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"I wish he were dead!"

Laguitte took her two hands in his and pressed them sympathetically. Then he fled, for he had a lump rising in his throat. He could have cried. But, by God! This time he was decided.

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IV.

The general inspection was to take place at the end of the month. The major had ten days before him. The next day, he dragged himself to the Cafe de Paris, where he ordered a beer. Melanie turned pale and it was with the fear of receiving a blow that Phrasine served him. He had been there an hour when he saw two officers passing,—the commanding officer of the battalion, Morandot, and Captain Doucet. He called to them.

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"Come in and have a beer."

When they had been served, Morandot asked the major,—

"Do you come here now?"

"Yes; the beer is good."

Captain Doucet closed one eye with a knowing look.

"Do you belong to the divan, major?"

Laguitte laughed without answering. Then they chaffed him about Melanie. Turning to the bar and assuming a gracious air, he called out,—

"Madame, some more beers."

Melanie was so surprised that she got up and served the beer herself. The major detained her; he gave her little pats on her hands that rested upon the back of his chair. And she, accustomed to caresses, returned his gallantries. Doucet and Morandot looked at each other. All of a sudden, La-

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guitte, who had been watching the square, exclaimed,—

“Hello! Burle!”

“Yes; it is his hour,” said Phrasine, drawing near. “The captain passes his afternoons here after leaving the office.”

The major, in spite of his bad leg, stood up. He drew out a chair.

“Come on, Burle! Have a beer!”

The captain, bewildered, came on mechanically. He stopped on the threshold hesitating.

“A beer,” ordered the major.

Then, turning,

“What is the matter with you? Come on in! What are you afraid of?”

When the captain was seated, there was a moment’s embarrassment. Melanie brought the beer with trembling hands, beset by the constant fear of a scene that would close

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her establishment. The gallantries of the major were disquieting. She tried to slip away when he invited her to take something with the gentlemen. But the major had already ordered Phrasine to bring a glass of anisette, and Melanie was forced to seat herself between him and Captain Burle. The major said in a harsh voice,—

“I insist upon respect being shown the ladies. To the health of Madame!”

Burle, his eyes on his glass, smiled with embarrassment. The two other officers, shocked at the idea of drinking thus with the proprietress, rose to go. Fortunately, the room was empty.

“What! you won’t drink with Madame?” said the major rudely to Burle. “At least, be polite.”

And, as Doucet and Morandot again made as if to go,—

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“Wait a moment,—we’ll go together. . . . It is that animal there who has never known how to behave!”

The two officers remained standing, transfixed by the sudden anger of the major. Melanie tried to restore peace by resting her hands on the arms of the two men. But Laguitte burst out again.

“No, leave me alone! Why didn’t he drink? I won’t allow you to be insulted! Besides, I have had enough of that hog there!”

Burle, very pale at this insult, rose and said to Borandot,—

“What is the matter with him? He called me in apparently just to make a scene. Is he drunk?”

“For God’s sake!” growled the major.

Rising in his turn, trembling on his legs, he aimed a blow at the captain with all his

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force. Melanie dodged just in time to avoid receiving part of it on the ear. There was a terrible row. Phrasine screamed behind the bar as if she were being beaten. Meanwhile, Doucet and Morandot had seized the captain to prevent his jumping at the major's throat. Outside, they calmed him down by laying all the blame on Laguitte. When they had sent Burle on his way, they re-entered the cafe, where Laguitte, very much affected with tears under the eyelids, pretended to be very calm.

"Listen, major," said the battalion officer, "this is very bad. The captain hasn't your grade, so we cannot authorize him to fight with you."

"Oh! we shall see," said the major.

The next day, the colonel sent for the major and the captain. He lectured them severely, reproaching them with having dishonored the army in a disreputable place.

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What would they do, as he could not authorize them to fight? That was the question that agitated the regiment. Excuses seemed inadequate, on account of the blow; but as Laguitte, on account of his bad leg, could not stand up well, it was thought that a reconciliation would take place, if the colonel demanded it.

“Now, come,” said the colonel, “will you take me for arbiter?”

“Pardon, colonel,” interrupted the major. “I have come to tender my resignation. Here it is. That settles everything. Have the goodness to set the day for the duel.”

Burle looked at him in astonishment.

“This is very serious,” said the colonel. “You have only two years more before retiring.”

But again Laguitte interrupted him, saying in an obstinate voice,—

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“That concerns me alone.”

“Oh! perfectly. . . . Well! I shall send in your resignation, and, on the day of its acceptance, I shall fix the day for your meeting.”

This turn amazed the regiment. The talk ran on Melanie and her fine figure. All the officers dreamed of her now, fired by the idea that she must be decidedly desirable to set by the ears two old tough hides. The battalion officer, meeting Laguitte, did not conceal his anxiety. If he should not be killed how would he live? For he had no fortune, and it was a question if he would have enough to eat with his pension money cut in half. When the other questioned him at to his animosity toward Burle, he replied with a vague gesture,—

“He annoyed me,—so much the worse.”

Each morning, at the canteen, at the of-

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ficers' table, the first words were,—

“Has the resignation arrived?”

The duel was looked forward to,—everyone discussed the probable issue. The majority believed that Laguitte would be run through in three seconds. Others shook their heads. Certainly, Laguitte had never been a prodigy of intelligence; he was even cited for his stupidity; but he was known as the best marksman in the regiment; and he had gained his epaulettes by a sanguinary bravery that seemed without conscience of danger. On the contrary, Burle, an indifferent fencer, passed for a coward. Well, they would see. And the emotion increased, for that devilish resignation was a long time coming.

The most anxious, the most upset, was certainly the major. Eight days went by,—the inspection was to take place in two days.

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He trembled at the thought of having struck his old friend and handed in his resignation without smothering the scandal. If he were killed, he would be spared the distress, and if he killed Burle, as he intended, the affair would be hushed up right away. He would thus save the honor of the army and little Charles could enter Saint-Cyr. But, great God! Those clerks at the Ministry would have to hurry up! The major could not stay in one place. He wandered to the post-office, watched the mails, questioned the Colonel's orderly.

On the eve of the inspection, he started for the colonel's, when he halted on seeing Madame Burle, who was taking Charles to college. He had not seen her since. He stood aside to allow her to pass. Neither spoke, to the great astonishment of Charles. Madame Burle, cold and haughty, brushed

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by the major, and, when she had passed, he looked after her with a tender bewilderment.

“Good God! Am I a man or not?” he growled, forcing back the tears.

When he reached the colonel’s, a captain who was there said,—

“Here it is. It has just arrived.”

“Ah!” he murmured, very pale.

The duel took place the next morning in the yard of the barracks, behind a little wall. The air was invigorating, a bright sun shone. They were almost obliged to carry Laguitte. One of his witnesses gave him an arm, while he leant heavily on his cane. Burle, his face bloated and yellow, gave the impression of being asleep standing up. Not a word was exchanged. Everyone was in a hurry to have it over with.

Captain Doucet gave the word,—

“Begin, gentlemen.”

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For ten minutes the swords crossed with their steely sound. Then, the captain made a feint. But the major, finding his wrist of other days, parried and, if he had followed with a thrust, Burle would have been pierced through. The latter grew livid, feeling himself at the mercy of this man who had spared him. He understood now that it was to be an execution.

Meanwhile, Laguitte, on his bad legs, which had become like stone, waited. The two adversaries eyed each other fixedly. In the troubled eyes of Burle appeared a supplication, a prayer for mercy. He knew why he was to die, and, like a child, he swore to be good. But the eyes of the major were implacable. Honor spoke, and he strangled his tenderness.

"Let us end it!" he ground out between his teeth.

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This time, he attacked. His sword flashed to right and left, and returned to plant itself in the captain's chest. He fell like a mass, without a cry.

Laguitte dropped his sword and looked at his poor old friend stretched on his back, with his big stomach in the air. He repeated, furious and broken with emotion,—

“Good God! Good God!”

They bore him away. His legs were paralyzed; he could not even use his cane.

Two months later, the major was dragging himself along in a deserted street by Vauchamp, when he again found himself face to face with Madame Burle and little Charles. They were in deep mourning. He tried to avoid them, but they walked straight up to him. Charles still had the sweet face of a frightened girl. Madame Burle's face was still severe, even harder and more livid.

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As Laguitte turned under an archway to leave them the entire pavement, she stopped suddenly in front of him and held out her hand. He hesitated, then took it and pressed it; but he trembled so that he shook the old lady's arm. There was a silence, a mute exchange of glances.

"Charles," finally said the old lady, "give your hand to the major."

The child obeyed without understanding. The major was very pale. Feeling that he should say something,—he could think of nothing but, "You are still thinking of sending him to Saint-Cyr?"

"Without a doubt, when he is old enough," answered Madame Burle.

The following week, Charles succumbed to typhoid fever. One evening, his grandmother had read to him the combat of the "Vengeur," to help him get well. He became delirious that night. He died from fear.

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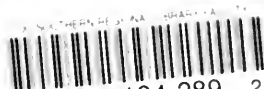
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